

Coping with the Death of a Camper

It's hard to imagine a more tragic or difficult event at camp than the death of a camper. Because of the expertise and attentiveness of camping professionals at all levels, these tragedies are rare. However, planning for the unthinkable will help you and your camp community cope with the tremendous emotional and professional sequelae, should a camper die. Camps, campers, parents, staff, and camp directors survive the death of a camper by grieving, learning, and supporting one another in a healthy, loving manner.

BEFORE A DEATH

Prevention

- ❑ Carefully hire and train staff.
 - Verify backgrounds (e.g., three references, required criminal background checks).
 - Verify skills sets (e.g., lifeguarding on *your* waterfront, use of *your* AED).
- ❑ Have your camp nurse or doctor carefully review all medical records or health forms.
- ❑ Establish the safest possible rules for activities.
 - Ask yourself what another reasonable camp director would do.
 - Ask yourself what the industry best practice is.
- ❑ Review and practice emergency action plans.
 - Lost Bather Drill, Search & Rescue Protocol, Anaphylaxis
 - Practice, practice, practice so that everyone is comfortable and knows what to do.

Preparation

- ❑ Consult with insurer to design emergency communication plans.
 - Draft letters or e-mails or phone call scripts to parents.
 - Consider the establishment of additional phone lines.
 - Design protocol for communicating with the media.
- ❑ Establish a support network of professionals.
 - Mental health professionals (for counseling, consultation, crisis plan design)
 - Trusted colleagues (for support, perspective, and assistance)
 - Consider a combination of local and non-local support.
- ❑ Understand and expect conceptual parts of tragedies:
 - the importance of flexibility in response
 - the dual role of a camp directors and staff as griever and grief counselor
 - the inevitable confusion and chaos despite careful planning

THE DEATH OF A CAMPER IS UNIQUE

- ❑ In addition to intense grief, the death of a child engenders an overwhelming sense of injustice—for the lost potential, unfulfilled dreams, and senseless suffering.
- ❑ The death occurs in a setting specifically designed to keep children safe—so feelings of insecurity among surviving children and families may increase.
- ❑ The death occurs under the supervision of surrogate caregivers, not parents—resulting in intense guilt among directors and staff, and intense helplessness among parents.
- ❑ As one director put it, “No director or staff member signs up for this experience, but it’s a risk you take when you walk out the door.”
- ❑ The camp community is strong and resilient, perhaps uniquely suited for healthy coping.



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IMMEDIATELY AFTER

Caring for the Deceased

- ❑ The director must contact the child's parents as soon as possible.
- ❑ (At some point, there may also be a reporting obligation to the Department of Health.)
- ❑ Provide continuity of care from on-site first-aid until parents join their child at the hospital.
 - The continual presence of the director or a high-ranking staff member is comforting.
 - The camp representative provides a critical communication link.
 - Consider being present in shifts if the parents' travel time is lengthy.

Establishing Safety for Survivors → Provide Stabilization

- ❑ Provide a safe environment.
 - Remove hazards or protect campers and staff from hazards.
 - Comfort witnesses and maintain a constant adult presence.
 - Alter future supervision of campers so they are not left alone.
- ❑ Provide information and reassurance.
 - Inform staff of news before campers because staff must then provide support.
 - Lack of information creates anxiety and may generate rumors. Be candid but not gory.
 - Accurate information begins a healing narrative. Provide it as you have it.
- ❑ Restore control and routine.
 - The activities of daily living must still be met (e.g., eating, talking, sleeping, playing).
 - Give choices within structure and be flexible to meet children's needs.
 - Reassure campers about what has happened, who is in charge, what's next.

Mourning & Remembrance, Stage 1 → Begin to Understand the Trauma

- ❑ Key: Connection with others.
- ❑ Expect and allow a wide range of grief reactions, including denial, numbness, shock, regressive behavior, bargaining, sadness, depression, anger, anxiety, guilt, remorse, and acceptance.
- ❑ Monitor the possibility of unhealthy coping, including the use of alcohol or other drugs, overworking to avoid feelings, isolation, and blaming others.
- ❑ Begin remembrance in a multifaceted, flexible way.
 - Allow campers and staff to participate or not in activities, as they feel ready.
 - Consult with a mental health professional about remembrance activities, such as poems, flags at half-mast, vespers or other spiritual / religious services, murals.
 - Consult with a mental health professional about designing support groups that are appropriate to individual's developmental level, proximity to the death, and needs.
- ❑ Strike a balance between activities focused on the deceased camper and regular activities, remembering that both kinds of activity can be healthy ways of coping with loss.

Communicating with Parents → Combine Reassurance with Coaching

- ❑ Inform other parents as soon as possible, given the circumstances. This builds trust.
 - Consult with your insurer and a mental health professional.
 - Provide ample opportunity for parents to contact you and their children.
- ❑ Allow enhanced communication with parents and peers. This gives opportunities for nurturance.
 - Additional time for journaling, writing letters, talking in groups.
 - Phone calls home where staff member speaks first and last with parents.
- ❑ Coach parents (and campers) to postpone hasty decisions about shortened stays.
 - The camp community is a healthy, healing community.
 - The ultimate goal is to return to a normal, joyful routine...at camp.
 - Allow for contact when parents insist (e.g., taking child out to lunch).



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Communicating with Media → Protect privacy and limit coverage

- ❑ Consult immediately with your insurer and allow expert spokespeople to work with you.
- ❑ Opt for written statements over personal appearances.
- ❑ As a general principle, be forthcoming while protecting the privacy of all camper families.
- ❑ Protect the privacy of the camp, the staff, and the campers, by prohibiting access to property.
- ❑ Advise the deceased camper's parents of your media plan and provide assistance to them.
- ❑ Note that media and legal fallout from a camper's death may persist for months or longer.

NOTES ON PARENT & MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS:



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THE FOLLOWING DAYS, WEEKS, and YEARS

Remembrance & Mourning, Stage 2 → Continue Understanding and Healing

- ❑ Ensure that staff have time to themselves, to grieve and recharge their batteries.
 - Give them permission to grieve in healthy ways that feel right to them.
 - Be flexible in granting time off without sacrificing the quality of camper supervision.
- ❑ Encourage healthy staff efforts to support campers.
 - This is the job they were hired to do, so it feels empowering.
 - Do not allow staff to overstep appropriate boundaries with children. Sometimes adults' rescue fantasies overwhelm their good judgment when working with vulnerable children.
- ❑ Enlist the help of mental health professionals to assist you, the staff, and the campers.
 - "Professionals" can be helpful, but always give people a choice of resources.
 - Some campers and staff would rather talk with each other or the camp director, so the grief counselor, psychologist, or social worker may become a low-profile consultant.
 - Plan some structured grieving led by a professional (e.g., circle time, balloon releases, memory boards) and some unstructured grieving, where counselors walk around camp and talk informally with whoever wants to talk.
- ❑ Thoughtfully consider camper and staff participation in out-of-camp funerals or memorials.
- ❑ Design an in-camp service to remember camper. Allow staff and camper participation.
- ❑ Hold regular meetings with your senior staff and be present in daily activities so that campers and staff feel cared for and so you understand the mental health of the camp first-hand.
- ❑ Give yourself time to grieve. This is personally painful and professionally demanding.
 - You can run on adrenaline for a limited time only. Eat, sleep, breathe.
 - Enlist the support of another trusted adult camping professional who can give you perspective, guidance, and support. Connect.

Reconnection with Ordinary Life → The "re-establishment of self"

- ❑ The core experiences of trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others
- ❑ Recovery and healing require empowerment and connection
 - Do what you do best: Run a nurturing, energetic, fun-filled camp
 - Share the responsibility of taking care of your staff and campers
 - Talk and be with others in order to integrate, over time, this event with your own sense of who you are, what you can do, and what your core values are.
- ❑ Talk with parents about referrals to professionals for one-on-one treatment if specific campers seem to be in chronic distress or be functioning in unhealthy way.

Grief as a Growth Process → Grow to a place of normalcy, understanding, and happiness

- ❑ Bolster your prevention efforts to minimize the likelihood of a future tragedy.
- ❑ Share your experience with other camping professionals.
- ❑ Express your feelings openly, remembering that there is not "correct" timing to mourning.
- ❑ Coach parents to expect some atypical adjustment reactions when campers return home.
- ❑ Maintain a connection with the deceased camper's family if they are receptive.



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